

Inner diversity as a creative source in coaching

*"The essential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness. The dominance of the latter perhaps defines our age."
(Charles Taylor, Sources of the self)*

Introduction

In this paper/workshop I would like to share some of my views and experiences as a coach on a personal, a professional and on an academic level. In this paper I explain some of my personal views on this subject. In the workshop, after a brief introduction, I primarily would like to facilitate a dialogue between participants about their own views.

Identity and inner diversity

"Who am I? How can I live a meaningful life?" Those questions have been asked by people all through human existence. Finding an answer to these questions has always been one of the most challenging things in life. But it seems that it has become even more complex in present modern times.

Every human being consists of a web of meanings, like a narrative. In our life, we constantly construct and deconstruct this web. This always happens in social interaction. Without that we even wouldn't be human. Writing this self-narrative and building our identity is a dynamic process. It has many facets and many layers and we are steadily constructing it to a coherent image.

That is why I use the term inner diversity when referring to individual identities. They are like kaleidoscopes. They have many aspects, built by personal and social history, gender and many, many others. Some of it is conscious, some of it subconscious, or confused. Only a small part is visible on the outside, in things like behavior, dress or attitude.

This is beautifully illustrated by Zadie Smith in the following passage of *White Teeth*, where one of the main characters, Samad, who is at his workplace, an Indian restaurant, thinks *"And that's what it was like most nights: abuse from Shiva and others, condescension from Ardashir, never seeing Alsana, never seeing the sun; clutching fifteen pence and then releasing it; wanting desperately to be wearing a sign, a large white placard that says:*

I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER. MY WIFE IS CALLED ALSANA, WE LIVE IN EAST LONDON BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO MOVE NORTH. I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH. I'M NOT SURE. I HAVE A FRIEND – ARCHIE – AND OTHERS. I AM FORTY-NINE BUT WOMEN STILL TURN IN THE STREETS. SOMETIMES.

But, no such placard existing, he had instead the urge, the need, to speak to every man, and, like the Ancient Mariner, explain constantly, constantly wanting to reassert something, anything." (p. 57)

We are a story. Polkinghorne, writing about narrative knowing, says "The self is that temporal order of human existence whose story begins with birth, has its middle in the

episodes of our lifespan and ends with death. It is the plot that gathers together these events into a coherent and meaningful unity, and thereby gives context and significance to the contribution that the individual episodes make toward the overall configuration that is the person. The self, then is a meaning rather than a substance or a thing” (p. 152)

Charles Taylor explores in *Sources of the Self* how the making of the modern identity has evolved. His elegant and colorful expose on this subject can't be summarized easily, as it is as complex as its subject. But I would like to mention some of the observations he makes. He points out that forming our identity is intrinsically connected to forming our personal moral framework, which is done in interaction with our social environment, our history and the culture we live in. Our notion of the self is related to a certain sense of inwardness. “In our languages of self-understanding, the opposition ‘inside-outside’ plays an important role. We think of our thoughts, ideas or feelings as being ‘within’ us, while the objects in the world which these mental states bear on are ‘without’.” (p.111) He shows the growing importance of ‘ordinary life’, those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, like work, marriage and the family. As a result of this, the need for self-reflection in life has grown and that is where the role of the coach evolved.

Coaching and inner diversity

Every encounter in life offers a possibility to reach and change the inner web. The encounter in a coaching process highlights this process. There is a conscious use of a relationship that works.

The need for coaching arises when a person experiences a tension between the construction of one's own identity in the inner-world and the demands of the outer world. This tension forms the drive, the force to change. The meaning that is given to life and work shows a deficit that needs attention. This sometimes can be formulated in questions like “why do I constantly have similar conflicts?” or “how can I plan my time more effectively?”, but often it is not so clear cut. The tension between the inner and the outer world, the confusion about one's own identity creates further confusion. “My story about myself doesn't work anymore. I have to rewrite it”.

The confusion that arises is a “creative confusion”. The inner kaleidoscope starts to move and this creates feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. In itself they form the conditions for change. The coachee (client) starts to rewrite and reintegrate fragments of her own identity in a new order. The basic conditions for this integration are the personal values and life-themes and the acquired insights in one's personal and professional strengths and weaknesses.

In a coaching relation we specifically facilitate a time and place for this to happen. When the inner-outer world tension doesn't arise and there are no real questions, the correct conditions to start coaching don't exist and coaching can not be fully effective yet. We not only rewrite or partly edit our story for this moment in time, but we also train our writing abilities for the future. In other words, we build competence that is needed at this particular moment and the competence to learn and adapt in the future. We are all part of a constant process of creative social learning. (Meijers & Wijers, p. 20)

Working relationship

Coaching is a working relationship and a relationship that works. This means it is a process where the relationship is the main vehicle for change. The coach functions as a mirror: mirroring her own diversity and bringing her own competence to learn to the stage. This reflection gives the coachee the opportunity to bring light to parts of her personality that were invisible yet, and it puts aspects in the dark which have been in the light too much.

Reflection is a key word, in a double sense. Reflection in coaching also means taking distance from the nitty-gritty of every day life, evaluating what is useful in the present experiences and what ought to be changed. This enables the coachee to develop new abilities and to leave behind forms of behavior that are no longer adequate.

Contribution of the coach

What is the contribution of the coach in this process?

The coach functions as a traveling companion in the quest for personal values and talents. The coach helps the coachee to endure the phase of creative confusion; she is optimistic when the coachee hasn't reached that phase yet and encourages. She paints the possible perspective of change and creates an open setting where anything can be questioned. In this process the coach helps to give meaning and structure to confusing experiences and emotions and she makes explicit what is implicitly said. She provides time for reflection, which in turn creates space for real creativity and growth.

As I said earlier, reflection is a key word. This means that the coachee also functions as a mirror for the coach. I consider this to be a bonus for both of them. This way the relationship can really work. And it challenges the coach to continue brushing her own inward mirror, as it is such an important professional instrument.

Conclusion

Coaching can be a place of silence in a storm of changes. The silence is the heart of this turbulence. As Tagore said: "The center is still and silent in the midst of an eternal dance of circles". This silence enables us to read the "subtler languages" in life. Taylor coins this expression, referring to the existential need for the modern human to develop their ability to read those subtler languages, especially in art.

What this means in our quest of life is beautifully described by the Polish poet Szymborska.

Writing a resume

What needs to be done?

Fill out the application

And enclose the resume.

*Regardless the length of life,
a resume is best kept short.*

*Concise, well-chosen facts are de rigueur.
Landscapes are replaced by addresses,
shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.*

*Of all your loves, mention only the marriage;
of all your children, only those who were born.*

*Who knows you matters more than whom you know.
Trips only if taken abroad.
Memberships in what without why.
Honors, but not how they were earned.*

*Write as if you've never talked to yourself
And always kept yourself at arm's length.*

*Pass over in silence your dogs, cats, birds,
dusty keepsakes, friends and dreams.*

*Price, not worth,
and title, not what's inside.
His shoe size, not where he's off to,
that one you pass off as yourself.
In addition, a photograph with one ear showing.
What matter is its shape, not what it hears.
What is there to hear, anyway?
The clatter of paper shredders.*

W Szyborska

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Ine van Emmerik (46) has a degree in Law and Psychology. After nearly twenty years of experience as a manager and HR-consultant in several national companies (i.e. HEMA and ABN-AMRO), she started her own business, Extravaleren, in 2000. In her role of business consultant, coach and career-counselor she focuses in particular on the learning abilities of people and organizations. She also started research (action/reflection) on the subject "Learning in encounter" and is participating in an international PhD program on "Literacy of women in leadership".

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